PRACTITIONER'S VIEWPOINT

Through A Glass, Darkly

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"Through a glass, darkly" is a biblical description of the imperfect way in which we see the world around us.

Little Red Riding Hood Meets Critical Social Theory

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I feel a little bit like Little Red Riding Hood wandering around in a forest that I'm only marginally familiar with, keeping both eyes peeled for the appearance of that Big Bad Wolf.

By my Little Red Riding Hood standards, this issue of DataBase - it's the first of a pair of issues, in fact - is quite a strange forest, indeed. When I agreed to write a column for this special issue, I noticed that its subject was Enterprise Systems (alias Enterprise Resource Planning Systems, alias ERPs, alias ESs). Good, I thought to myself, that's a subject about which I have some knowledge and, in fact, some fairly strong opinions.

But then I noticed that this special issue was in fact a "critical" issue. In true naive Little Red Riding Hood fashion, I said to myself, "Oh, good, there'll be some articles pro and con about ERPs, some of them probably wringing their academic hands about ERP failures, and others doing academic high-fives about ERP successes."

Little did I know. What I was to learn next was that "critical," in the sense of this special issue, had a much more specific meaning. "Critical" was actually short for "Critical social theory" (CST), and that phrase carries a whole lot of very focused baggage with it. To quote from the draft editorials I read in preparing to write this column, CST is about

- improvement of the human condition (that seems like a universally positive kind of idea)
- questioning "managerialism" (well, OK, I've been known to question a little managerialism myself)
- questioning the neutrality of technology (huh?)
- being "a bit offensive to some readers" (been there, done that!)
- antagonistic, convoluted, and perhaps even tedious (this is beginning to sound worrisome)
- using "Marxian economic analysis" (uh-oh, so that's what all of this is about)

Reading further, with the idea of finding out what these CST authors were going to say about ERPs in particular, I found ERPs being touted as

- "a juggernaut, a runaway engine of great power"
- the cause of "conflict, [which is] a certain outcome in most ERP efforts"
- "a tool of appeasement, "wherein user participation is a ruse to disguise management's true (and nefarious) intentions"
- having the potential for empowerment, but with the "empowering potential [usually] suppressed"

It was about then that I began to feel like Little Red Riding Hood. My view of ERPs, you see, is that of a software engineer. I find them a marvelous example of the generalization of an application domain (back-office, transaction-processing systems), something that computer scientists and software engineers have been striving for since the beginning of their respective fields. Striving for, for the most part, with little or no success (compiler-compilers and database tools being perhaps the most significant counter-examples). So there I was, I began to realize, solidly in the "technology is neutral" camp, prepared to deal with an issue of technology that the authors of these papers, and the editors of this special issue, probably have little or no interest in.

And that surprised me. I have always been known as something of a rabble-rouser. I have marched in civil-rights parades, taught minority history classes in all-white churches, and adopted mixed-race children (my family really is a "rainbow coalition"). I have been known as a contrarian, a curmudgeon (I have the plaque from a European conference to prove it!), a tilter at windmills. I've been intolerant in the pursuit of causes I believed in deeply, and rationalized that the ends justified those particular means. In short, I thought I was comfortable in almost all guises of counterculture movements.

But, to tell you the truth, this particular Little Red Riding Hood really isn't comfortable in this particular forest. I have a vague unease about Marxist causes, politically motivated paranoia, and - I suppose - Critical Social Theory. There's a lot of stuff about ERPs that fascinates me, and I was looking forward to sharing it here. I now see, that seems totally inappropriate. So let me step aside, head for the edge of the forest, and let the CST movement have its day.

I wanted to make some sort of analogy to the Big Bad Wolf about here, but I can't think of a meaningful-yet-tactful way of doing that.

About the Author

Robert L. Glass is president of Computing Trends, publishers of the Software Practitioner. He has been active in the field of computing and software for over 45 years, largely in industry (aerospace) but also as an academic (Seattle University, Software Engineering Institute). He is the author of over 20 books and 70 published papers on computing subjects, and a columnist for Communications of the ACM ("The Practical Programmer") and IEEE Software ("The Loyal Opposition"). He characterizes himself as having his head in the academic side of computing, but his heart in its practice. He can be reached at rlglass@acm.org.